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# THE GREEK TRADITION

by GEORGE BOAS

AN OUTLINE OF THE SYMPOSIUM TO BE HELD DURING MAY AT THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART

THE SYMPOSIUM held at the Baltimore Museum of Art last spring on Courbet and the Naturalistic Movement appeared to be so successful that it was decided to repeat the experiment this year. The purpose of these symposia is not simply to talk about something connected with the history of art but to talk about it in a special way. It has been assumed by the director of the symposium—or should we say the toastmaster?—that the fine arts do not develop in isolation from the rest of civilization but form an integral part of it. Just as science, philosophy, industry, social customs influence the arts, so the arts have a reciprocal influence upon science, philosophy, industry and social customs. Thus last year we studied not merely Courbet and the painters who may have been “influenced” by him, but naturalism in science, in music, in the dance, on the stage, and so on.

The subject chosen for this year's Symposium is somewhat different. The organizer of the Symposium as a teacher had frequently been struck by references to a people known as “The Greeks.” In his courses in the history of philosophy he had heard of “The Greek Way of Life”; in his reading in the history of art, he had seen sentences about “The Greek Sense of Beauty”; in conversation with his colleagues he had heard about “Greek Science.” Being of a curious turn of mind, he was tempted to read more and more deeply in Greek and Latin writings—only to find that in the first place there were no The Greeks, but just a lot of Greeks.

In the second place he discovered that what The Greeks thought and felt depended to a large extent upon whom one was reading. If one read Cicero one got one idea of The Greeks; if one read Tertullian, one got another. Saint Jerome did not seem to agree with Justin Martyr and Benjamin Jowett certainly did not agree with Jane Harrison. The Greeks then seemed to be a function, to some extent, of the time and place of the person writing about them.

The same thing appeared to be true if one looked at pictures inspired by Greek and Roman themes. The Italian

Renaissance and the German, for that matter, had each its own Ancients. Not only do the Three Graces, for instance, as depicted by a Rhenish painter of the early sixteenth century, resemble distinctly German graciousness, but they are equipped with all the finery which a German of the period would think fitting for such elegant goddesses. They do not resemble the attendant divinities of a Titian Venus nor do they suggest any greater historical veridity than the *Judgment of Paris* by Renoir, whose debt to Olio was paid by giving the male figure in the picture a Phrygian bonnet.

The history of the classical ideal, as shown in iconography, has of course been studied for years by the members of the Warburg Institute. The Baltimore Museum has no intention of trying to show its colleagues in London facts that they do not know, but on the contrary to put into semi-popular form a method of studying art which has proved so fruitful when they have applied it. We are therefore undertaking to suggest how something called *The Greek Tradition* has grown through the centuries, how each age had its own Greeks, how each individual emphasized certain features of classical civilization as typical, and how all thought they were talking about the same thing.

The program of papers to be read successively on the mornings of May 15, 16, 17, will run from the “Fortunes of Platonism,” by Irwin Edman of Columbia to “The Classic Revival in American Architecture,” by Talbot Hamlin. This year only nine papers will be read, though it is hoped that more may be printed. The nine papers to be read do not pretend to cover the field, but merely to suggest to the public the richness and variety of the problems to be met. Thus the story of the Greek Tradition does not begin with Plato, nor do its fortunes rise and fall with the fortunes of Platonism. But at the same time our ideas about Greek thought have been colored pre-eminently by our ideas about Plato. There were years when very few of the Dialogues were read, when the *Timaeus*, for instance, was the main source of our information about Platonism. In such periods Plato became largely a pre-Christian Christian, as Vergil at one time—

to Saint Jerome's disgust—became a prophet. At times such dialogues as the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* were the true word about Plato. Thereupon Plato became pre-eminently the apostle of something known as Platonic love. The Plato of Walter Pater is certainly not the Plato of Dean Woodbridge and since Plato is one of those Greeks whose writings have survived in quantity, it has been his misfortune to become the typical Greek. Yet a paper on "The Fortunes of Aristotle" would have done perhaps as well to illustrate our point.

A second paper, by H. W. Prescott of the University of Chicago, deals with "The Greek Tradition in the Hellenistic Age." It was during this period that one of the most important events occurred in the development of this idea, namely the identification of the Greek and Latin pantheons. This sometimes took an extraordinary turn, as when Kronos became Saturn, the former being a paidophagus—if the neologism is permissible—somewhat ridiculous old god, the latter a beneficent teacher of the rural arts. This was also the period when the winged cupids replaced the fierce young archer as the god of love and when genre literature and art became as Greek as tragedy and religion. The Greece of the late eighteenth century was largely Alexandria, as is now well known, and Professor Prescott's paper suggests how such things took place.

Each age of course thought it had finally discovered the "real" Greece and Rome. This thought was partly based upon the science of archaeology and, as archaeology developed, new light was thrown upon historic antiquity. The findings of Winckelmann were largely instrumental in making the Greece of the Apollo Belvedere and the Laocoon the "real" Greece and we all know into what ecstasies the amateurs of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were thrown by such works of art. One of the most influential books in aesthetics was built about the second of these monuments and for years its dicta became the commonplaces of writers on "the Greek view" of beauty and the limitations of the arts. But during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries similar novelties have been uncovered and have each contributed its portion to reorienting men's minds about classical antiquity. The Greece of Alma-Tadema, Leighton, Moore, the Greece of Tennyson and William Morris, the Greece of Gilbert Murray, are all influenced in part by new discoveries in archaeology. The translation by Lang, Leaf and Myer of the *Iliad* into archaistic English prose was symptomatic of the distance which was then being perceived between Homer's Greece and our own time. To present the effects of archaeology upon our ideas of the Greek Tradition was the work of Dr. Dorothy Kent Hill of the Walters Art Gallery.

During the Middle Ages well-known changes occurred in the Greek Tradition. No Ancient would have thought of Vergil as either a prophet or a magician or a ridiculous iover. No ancient would have imagined the story of Aristotle and Campaspe. No Ancient would have read, or could have read by the very nature of things, Christian ethics in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* nor have anticipated the

chivalric romances in which Alexander the Great and Troilus and Cressida figured. No Ancient could have imagined the transformation that Apollo and Hercules were to undergo at the hands of their Christian heirs. To study such features of our story was undertaken by Dr. Dorothy Miner of the Walters Art Gallery, while Sidney Painter of the Johns Hopkins University contributes a paper on "John of Salisbury and the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century."

When one comes to that period known popularly as the Renaissance, one finds of course so much material that rigorous selection is imperative. What the painters did to the Greek Tradition is too well known even by the general public to require explanation and, moreover, the Museum in co-operation with the Walters Art Gallery has prepared exhibits which are sufficiently illustrative of their deeds to need no supplementing in papers. But one of the most interesting uses of the authority of the Ancients and one least known to students of art history is that found in the history of music. The opera when it began seems to have been thought of as a revival of Greek tragedy, which in part accounts for the use made by the early composers of such themes as Orpheus and Eurydice, Iphigenia and the like. Dr. Lubov Keefer, whose activities carry her between the Johns Hopkins University and the Peabody Conservatory of Music, has written a paper on the beginnings of the opera in Italy, illuminating this obscure corner of the history which we are interested in tracing. She shows clearly how the feeling that the composers were reviving something Greek lent a power to their work which was similar to that given to the new architecture in the Italy of the early Renaissance.

It is well known by literary historians that the seventeenth century was engaged in the famous "Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns." How pervasive of the times this quarrel became is not perhaps so well known. The quarrel between the partisans of Rubens and those of Poussin, that between the Libertines and the Cartesians are its counterparts in painting and philosophy. Dr. Ruth Cherniss, whose paper on "The Anti-Naturalists" will be remembered, contributes one this year on the famous quarrel which provides an unusual synthesis of information.

The last day of the Symposium will be given over to three papers on more recent subjects. Ernst Feise, of the Johns Hopkins University, will open the session with a paper on "The Greek Tradition in Germany" in which he will show how in this least mediterranean of countries, a civilization from the south brought inspiration. The Germans produced a kind of Greek which was never known before, not only in the work of their archaeologists but also in that of their philosophers—if they will still accept Mendelssohn as one of their philosophers—and poets. The Goethe whom we are most likely to remember is the Goethe of the Olympian period, not the Goethe whose romantic passions swept him away and in general the contribution of Germany in fixing a new image of Greece in the modern mind must not be lost from sight.

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Dr. Henry Sigerist, Director of the Institute of the History of Medicine of the Johns Hopkins University, will discuss one of the least-remembered subjects connected with this tradition: its relations to the history of science. The very ideal of science is Greek, and scientists have at all times been keenly aware of their debt to antiquity. But here again the Greek of a medieval scientist is not that of a Copernicus. Yet the same ideals of order, mathematical precision, clarity, which one finds in the work of a painter like, let us say, David, appear in the writings of those scientists who found their inspiration in Tellenic antiquity.

But none of this was devoid of social effects and causes in the narrower sense. The French Revolutionist who called himself Brutus or Anacharsis was paralleled by the American who signed his letters to the editor *Cives*. Talbot Hamlin, of the Avery Library, in "The Classic Revival in American Architecture," brings out clearly how the fluted column and appropriate

capital were symbols of something much larger than an aesthetic fashion. He shows how the classic revival was a revival of all human tastes and aspirations.

These ten papers are to be edited by the writer of this notice and will appear in book form on May 15th. His task will be to furnish an interpretative foreword and connective material between the papers so they will appear less isolated from each other. To furnish all the connective material would require not only encyclopedic learning but an encyclopedic volume, the former of which no one man—least of all the editor—possesses. The latter would require more money than a museum supported by a few membership fees could possibly produce.

Supplementing the papers will be an exhibition of works of art held jointly at the Walters Art Gallery and the Baltimore Museum of Art illustrating the Greek Tradition in the Fine Arts. The former with a fine fraternal feeling is turning over its entrance court

—itself an example of what the Greek Tradition did to American architecture—to a show of some of its most interesting objects, vases, sculpture, medieval manuscripts, and paintings. Here one will be able to see in a compact form a whole artistic tradition, running from classical antiquity to our own times.

The Baltimore Museum of Art, having few pictures of its own, has borrowed twenty-five paintings on Greek themes from private collectors, museums and dealers. The earliest of the paintings is the beautiful Piero di Cosimo *Finding of Vulcan* generously lent once more by the Wadsworth Athenaeum; the latest is Paul Klee's *Orpheus* from the Buchholz Galleries. We have purposely avoided choosing paintings simply because our contemporaries think them especially fine; the exhibition is historical and we do not here play the interior decorator. There are certain to be loud cries of dismay when visitors see the Walters Gallery's Alma-Tadema's *Sappho* hanging near Paul Cadmus's *Venus and Adonis* from the Midtown Gallery. But the problem

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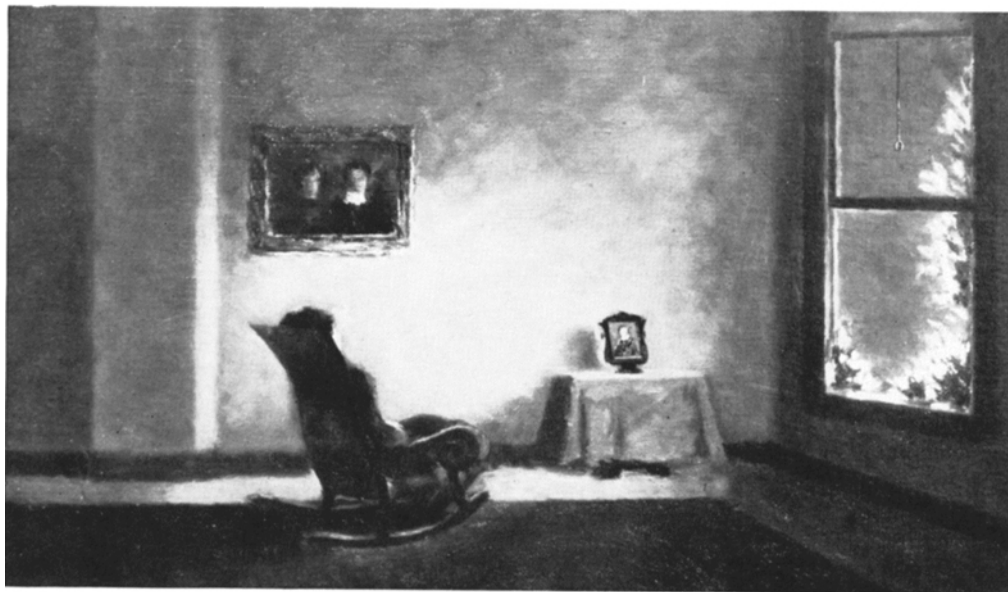
of hanging a show of this kind is so great that students of the arts should surely be charitable.

It is sometimes said that the Renaissance, like the Middle Ages, had no historical sense. In proof of this one shows crucifixions in which the figur-

the women are German rather than what we today should think of as Greek ideals; their headdresses and jewelry are certainly not Greek. But the Graces at this time were symbols; they were the goddesses who in Spenser's words:

"all gracious gifts bestow

had achieved a kind of poetic beauty which no other people had equaled, and it was the business of man—when he was not occupied with heavenly things—to look with Greek eyes and speak with a Greek tongue. So Englishmen up to a very recent date fortified their political and aesthetic



THE WIDOW

HOBSON PITTMAN

Reproduced through the courtesy of the Walker Galleries

ants are dressed in Italian clothes and nativities where the architecture is Italian. But the lack of an historical sense may mean merely that the past is so vivid that it seems to be present, or that one has so great a sense of kinship between all men that dates appear to be insignificant. It is certainly true that the island of Lemnos in Piero di Cosimo's picture is no more Mediterranean than a landscape by Henri Rousseau would be. The basket borne on the head of one of the nymphs and the poodle carried in the arms of another are probably more modern than ancient. But at the same time the very lack of archaeological truth may be simple evidence of how vividly the story impressed the mind of the artist. This thesis becomes fortified when one discovers the relation of the panel to others in the series on the life of primitive man.

Similar remarks could be made about such a painting as *The Three Graces*, from the Rhenish School of the early sixteenth century. It is obvious that

Which deck the body or adorn the mind."

There could be no more historical truth in the depiction of divinities and symbols than there could be in mathematics. The subjects dwelt in a non-historical world. To present them historically was already not to believe in them. It was to conceive of them as something "dated."

The Greek Tradition in modern art may be said to have gone through three periods in the first two of which "The Greeks" were an ideal. In the first their legends were accepted as a kind of earthly ideal, as the most poetic, the most beautiful way of presenting eternal truths. Thus the little cupids of the emblems seemed the natural way to show love, regardless of man's disbelief in an actual god of love. Satyrs and nymphs, Cupid and Psyche, reclining Ariadne, and the like became a manner of expressing thoughts as conventional as social etiquette, but not necessarily insincere. It was accepted that the Greeks

opinions with appropriate quotations from Cicero or Horace, as clergymen quoted the Bible in moral matters.

This period survived into recent times in the schools where Greek mythology in the simplified and harmonious form presented by Bulfinch or C. M. Gayley was taught the boys and girls. None of us believed in the real existence of Europa, Cadmus, Andromeda but all of us accepted a knowledge of their histories as essential to our education and as in any event interesting. As archaeological knowledge developed, new light was thrown on the actual Greeks, their diversities and complexities, their unpleasant as well as their agreeable features. But still the tradition survived that their legends were the fitting subject for the fine arts. More accurate costumes and accoutrement might be devised by the artists, but still the human beings adorned by them were presented as the most beautiful in accordance with the taste of the time. The gaiety and bustle of Piero di Cosimo might give



NORTH WINDOW  
by BIANCA TODD  
In the exhibition of  
paintings at the Argent  
Galleries, April 24-May 6.

way to the gravity and balance of Poussin or Le Sueur and that to the sculptural frigidity of David, but each painter thought that he was being a better painter for presenting his thoughts in Hellenic guise. Again when the romantic painters did Greek subjects, as in Delacroix's *Perseus and Andromeda*, (a sketch for which from the Cone Collection is being shown) or Géricault's *Hercules and Lichas*, lent by Smith College, the artists utilize the ancient stories upon which to practice their pictorial gifts. They chose subjects of struggle and swirl because they liked struggle and swirl, and that they chose them from ancient stories was simply the effect of custom.

The third period set in when people like Daumier began ridiculing the antique. His series of caricatures, ex-

amples of which will be assembled in the print rooms, are found to cover almost every one of the famous myths which had been treated seriously—and were to continue to be treated seriously for years. But Daumier could not have dealt with the tradition in this manner unless there were reasons to believe in the fallibility of the Ancients. The political aspects of Hellenism during the late eighteenth century are well known, it was associated in the Revolution with the left, but by Daumier's time it was associated with reaction. It had already become the possession of the English upper classes and the French Société des Bonnes Lettres. The study of the classics was doomed, one might argue, when the Elder Brutus, Harmodius and Aristogeiton and their fellows ceased being heroes and became revolutionaries. For from that time on the

works of fine art, the poems, dramatic and lyric, would be emphasized to the detriment of the ideas. Leading actresses, like Rachel, could appear as Phèdre and give that bitter role a certain theatrical sweetness. Landsee, could paint a canvas in which a tousled and obvious mongrel barks at a well-groomed and regal hound and call it "Diogenes and Alexander." Alma-Tadema could depict Sappho with all the props of the best equipped stage, details archaeologically correct enough to have thrilled even David Belasco and the poetess so well groomed and so clearly upper-class English as not to offend the feelings of the Royal Academy.

The twenty-five paintings selected to illustrate this history are an education in themselves if seen with an understanding eye. One sees in them simple acceptance of legend, reverence, admiration, humor, contempt. We do not mean to assert that there were literally periods in the history of our taste for antiquity during which a pervasive sense of humor or admiration or what you will obtain. As each new attitude came into existence, the old continued. There are at the present time people whose attitude towards "The Greeks" is identical with that of David's. There are others who think of them as semi-primitive savages. There are others who think of them as glorious—if somewhat pallid—statues. Each age retains something of the ages that have gone before and we must not pretend that our own time is any different. But at least we shall have shown, I think, that "The Greeks" were as different in painting as they were in the other arts and in the history of thought.

A bas-relief in pietra serena, supposedly representing St. Cecelia, by Desiderio da Settignano, has been purchased by the Toledo Museum of Art from the Edward Drummond Libbey fund. This most popular of fifteenth century Florentine sculptures has been known only through an early and imperfect cast. Following upon the recent purchase of the magnificent Corneille de Lyon Portrait the Toledo Museum is to be congratulated upon the acquisition of the original St. Cecelia.